

## Easing Musical Practice

By ROBERTA HERSHENSON

**P**RACTICE, practice. Every good music student does it, but how many enjoy it? Practicing is lonely, frustrating and sometimes painful, many say. Yet the conscientious persevere, and this, according to the violinist and teacher Burton Kaplan, is not always a beneficial thing.

Mr. Kaplan, a professor at the Manhattan School of Music, studies the psychological discord that disrupts musical fluency. He has packed his insights (such as: "The mind is the third hand") into a six-session course called "Practicers Anonymous," currently being offered at the Hoff-Barthelson Music School here.

The teacher wants to demonstrate to students at all levels of proficiency that nervousness, fear and chronic dissatisfaction are shared problems with specific solutions. Honesty, and a willingness to consult one's inner self in public, are basic components of the course.

### Probing Questions Are Posed

The classes, conducted separately for teen-agers and adults, are struc-



Roberta Hershenson

Burton Kaplan teaching his "Practicers Anonymous" course at the Hoff-Barthelson Music School in Scarsdale.

ured as group practice sessions. Mr. Kaplan — who said that he would have become a psychiatrist had he not left medical school for music school — asks probing questions after each student plays.

"Did you have a sense of impending doom?" he inquired of Tasha Mehne, one recent evening, after the 16-year-old played a spirited work by Bartok.

"I kept thinking I was going to

mess up," said Ms. Mehne, who lives in Pleasantville.

"Slow it down until that feeling disappears," Mr. Kaplan told her.

When Ms. Mehne still had "the feeling," despite playing the piece more slowly, Mr. Kaplan set the metronome at an even slower tempo. "Why be nervous?" he asked. "Look for comfort."

### Striving for a Sense of Ease

The teacher suggested that Ms. Mehne make eliminating the worry about "messing up" part of her practice goal. "Somewhere, the worry became part of the piece," Mr. Kaplan said. "Everything that happens, especially inside you, becomes part of the training."

After Ms. Mehne — who hopes to

become a concert pianist — could play the piece comfortably four times, Mr. Kaplan asked her to notice the "ease inside" that was projected in her playing. "That ease is what you want to learn," the teacher said. "You should feel 'it's a piece of cake — I can do that!'"

Too fast, too soon is a common tendency among aspiring players, Mr. Kaplan said. "Everyone wants to get to the products," he added. "The future, the dream" of a beautifully played piece "takes over."

Practicing too fast reinforces mistakes, which then become "buried into habit," Mr. Kaplan observed. As a result, the player approaches performing — whether for a teacher, a few friends or a large audience —

## A teacher tries to alleviate the nervousness and fear among students.

with "the memory of what he can't do easily." This insecurity affects the performance, causing increased nervousness (although some nervousness is natural) as the player anticipates problem passages.

The solution, Mr. Kaplan tells students, is to "live in the present,"

setting and meeting practice standards before increasing speed.

### How to Avoid 'Slips'

Planning and "imaging," or imagining oneself playing and hearing the sound, Mr. Kaplan said, helps the musician avoid not only "external

slips"— actual mistakes — but also "internal slips," characterized by what he called a "phew, I just made it" feeling.

An internal slip reveals itself not at the problem measure itself, but a few seconds later, when the player loses concentration and a sense of control. Jennifer Epel, a 15-year-old pianist from White Plains, said she was getting a handle on that.

"My problem was that I didn't look at the music when I needed to," Ms. Epel said. "Mr. Kaplan taught me to keep looking up" at the page "and down" at the piano, she explained. "After a little while of doing that, I found I didn't need the music so much anymore."

Another common complaint, said

the teacher, is "it didn't come out at the lesson as well as when I practiced." This syndrome results from unrealistic expectations, Mr. Kaplan noted. "Students remember the success they had after working on the piece for 20 minutes at home," he explained. "But at the lesson, they expect it to work in one minute. That's like a performance."

### Self-Confidence Is Applauded

Florence Prindle, an adult student, said her goal was "to be able to play a piece that I love and share it with someone." After she played an "Adagio" by Bach on the piano, the class applauded her increased self-confi-

Continued on Page 40

# Easing Musical Practice

Continued From Page 39

dence and expressiveness.

"I've been getting my whole self into it more," said Ms. Prindle, who lives in Ardsley. "I have the feeling I'm singing the piece inside myself. I didn't feel outside myself when I played."

Mr. Kaplan especially noted Ms. Prindle's recovery after she made a mistake during the piece. "That's a change for you," he said. "You had the composure to go back and find your way quite comfortably. After that, you had reason to believe you'd be fine."

Between classes, students record their progress in "The Musician's Practice Log," a workbook written by Mr. Kaplan and published in 1985. The book aims to help students set reasonable goals, keep track of their practice time and evaluate the results.

## 'Internal Management'

As Mr. Kaplan sees it, practicing an instrument is an "internal management problem." The student striving for proficiency is like an athlete aspiring to "Olympic precision." The musician, however, must also "coordinate feeling and hearing," and at the same time "process his seeing" (reading of the music) and "kinesthetic awareness." This, Mr. Kaplan concluded, is "a remarkable challenge," made "unreasonable" by the fact that "each person coaches himself in the practice room."

"People make only five minutes of progress out of the hour they practice a day," Mr. Kaplan said. This is because practicing without a coach "puts a burden on the student's capacity for insight."

While daily private lessons are economically unfeasible for most people, Mr. Kaplan conceded, classes can



Robert Hershenson

Jennifer Epel, a 15-year-old pianist from White Plains, during one of Mr. Kaplan's classes at the school.

provide detailed guidance and at the same time alleviate the student's private agony.

"Misery loves company," the teacher said. "If we can see that everyone has problems, we won't be as miserable."

## Two Problems for Amateurs

Amateurs, who are usually either high school students or older adults turning seriously to music, have two kinds of problems, Mr. Kaplan noted. Either they are not putting in enough practice time ("Practicing is an appointment with yourself," Mr. Kaplan emphasized), or they are not using their time effectively.

If, in addition, the amount of mate-

rial they are tackling is inappropriate, frustration and disappointment are inevitable.

When concentration flags there is usually a good reason, the musician added. "Something inside you is saying 'This is stupid! You are making the same mistakes over and over again!' When the message comes, stop," he advised. "Not concentrating is a signal like pain. It tells you that something's wrong."

It is not a signal to quit music, however. "When people have problems, they feel they just can't do it, or they're not talented," Mr. Kaplan said. "What they need is some kind of organization of the problem that blocks their development." ■